

FISH AND WDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 12, 2013

Agenda Item: Otter Island Fisheries Conservation Area - Land Acquisition

Division: Fisheries

Action Needed: Final Approval

Time Needed for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

On June 14, 2012, the Commission endorsed FWP evaluating four parcels along the upper Flathead River for acquisition, including a proposed Conrad Drive Fisheries Conservation Area (FCA). FWP now proposes to acquire this 147-acre parcel, renamed the Otter Island FCA and located 1.5 miles east of Kalispell. The property adjoins FWP's 126-acre Old Steel Bridge Fishing Access Site, and includes important riparian and wetland habitats along a mile of the Flathead River, nearly one mile of active side channel, and a small spring creek. There will be no cost to FWP for the land acquisition. The property was purchased in 2011 by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to protect it from threat of development. Funding for that purchase (\$1.6 million) was provided by the Bonneville Power Administration, as part of the Hungry Horse Dam mitigation program. BPA retains a perpetual conservation easement (CE) to ensure protection of the site's fish and wildlife habitat and other ecosystem functions. The property would be managed by FWP for fish and wildlife habitat, open space, and dispersed public recreation, all as provided for in BPA's CE and FWP's draft Management Plan. The ownership transfer will enhance management efficiency of the combined 273-acre Otter Island - Old Steel Bridge area. The ownership transfer complements a related transaction, through which FWP assisted in the allocation of separate BPA funds to CSKT for the Tribes' acquisition of a Swan Valley conservation property.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP issued its draft environmental assessment for a 30-day public review Sept. 13, 2013. Public notice was accomplished via legal ads, press releases, and emails/letters to all adjoining landowners and other interested parties. An article about the project appeared in the local newspaper. FWP received eight comments supporting the proposed project and two opposed. One citizen opposed the project because of confusion over the details of the proposed transfer by the CSKT. CSKT addressed this concern in a letter to FWP. Another citizen had management concerns and was opposed unless these concerns were addressed by FWP. FWP also received suggestions about proposed management from a strong supporter. FWP responded to all the concerns and comments in the decision notice through minor modifications to the management plan.

Alternatives and Analysis

The EA considered the no-action alternative, under which CSKT would continue to own and manage this property. However, the EA analysis identified certain management benefits along this section of the Flathead River that would be achieved through FWP ownership, and did not find any significant negative impacts associated with proceeding with the proposed action.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP appreciates CSKT's willingness to transfer property ownership, and recommends that the Commission approve the project as proposed in the Final EA and Decision Notice. This project maintains the direct benefits of securing and protecting fish and wildlife habitat along the Flathead River, consolidates FWP ownership in the Otter Island - Old Steel Bridge area, improves management and enforcement efficiencies, and maintains public access to additional land along the Flathead River.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Commission approve FWP's fee acquisition of the 147-acre Otter Island Fisheries Conservation Area, as described in the Nov. 18, 2013 Decision Notice.